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Crossing into Otherness—Outlanding Woolf

2. Outlanding Woolf

Poetic estrangement/psychic estrangement

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## The Language of The Other in *Between the Acts*

*Between the Acts* et le langage de l'Autre

KATHARINE SWARBRICK

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### Résumés

Français English

Cet article se concentre sur l'idée de la quintessence visée par Woolf à travers ses écrits, dans son rapport aux dislocations qui caractérisent son œuvre. Il cherche à explorer la façon dont ces aspects apparemment opposés de sa fiction se lient pour donner naissance à la dimension de l'étrangeté toute particulière que l'on découvre dans les deux textes abordés par cette analyse : *Les Vagues* et *Entre les actes*. Son inspiration prend comme point de départ les observations de Kristeva sur la relation entre la folie de Woolf et les liens qu'entretient celle-ci avec l'ordre symbolique et paternel théorisé dans les œuvres de Lacan. Jusqu'à quel point une lecture du *Séminaire livre III* de Lacan, peut-elle élucider l'unique étrangeté que l'on trouve dans le dernier roman de Woolf et l'impact de ce texte sur le destin de l'auteure ?

This article examines Woolf's quest to create the quintessential text, in its relation to the ruptures and dislocation which characterise her work. It seeks to shed light on the links between these apparently opposing aspects of her fiction and their role in the creation of the quality of strangeness familiar to her reader, through an analysis of *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*. Following Kristeva's observation on the madness of Woolf, which links it to the author's relation with the symbolic paternal order theorised in the works of Lacan, this investigation seeks to explore what constitutes the strangeness of *Between the Acts*—and the impact the final novel visited on its author—through a reading of selected concepts from Lacan's *Seminar III (The Psychoses)*.

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### Entrées d'index

**Mots-clés :** Woolf (Virginia), Lacan (Jacques), modernisme, psychanalyse

**Keywords :** Woolf (Virginia), Lacan (Jacques), Modernism, psychoanalysis

## Texte intégral

- 1 Strangeness or estrangement in the fiction of Woolf is a concept linking key elements which span her texts, and which have been perceptively highlighted by her critical readership:<sup>1</sup> dislocation of time and space, randomness, dispersion, interruption, death and its impact, constitute one select thematic grouping of such elements; a converse set of preoccupations including fantasy, unity, 'one-making' and the conveyance of a quintessence of reality, pits itself against the scraps and fragments of recounted experience but is likewise a crucial part of the strange illusion which emerges at significant moments in the pages of Woolf. Reality transposed in its imperfections, in shreds and patches, often lies behind the uncanny, sometimes traumatic sensations that dislocate the world of Woolf's characters; the quest to make the moment whole, however, could be argued as strangeness in its absolute form.
- 2 For Woolf, it was her final work, *Between the Acts* that most fully achieved the fictional portrayal of the quintessential reality she sought. The argument that follows seeks to highlight the ways in which her perceived wholeness of the text goes hand in glove with the effect of strange illusion which emerges from a reading of *Between the Acts*, and that this wholeness remains inextricably linked with the randomness and fragmentation which is equally associated with the novel's impact. The world of Pointz Hall, the homely house, encapsulated within twenty-four hours, from one summer's evening to the next, constitutes a moment separated in time and space from the maelstrom of events which surround it, and in which there is tea on the lawn, and talk of the weather, music, a pageant and cows in the meadow. Unreal already, in its acute simplicity and banality, it is a world which causes one to wonder from the start, despite the petty, fleeting rivalries and tensions which emerge and fade between protagonists, and the casual, passing references to war, how life can unfold in so uncomplicated a manner. The historical moments of terrifying suspense—of summer 1939 in which *Between the Acts* is set, of 1940 in which it was written, and of 1941 which saw its posthumous publication—play a great part in understanding how Woolf's conveyance of normality requires an obliteration of troublesome events so vigorous that the 'reality' from which these are banished is saturated with the thoroughly uncanny effect of their disappearance. The context of the war years, which required many of those who lived through them to maintain a protective illusion of normality whose fragility was constantly threatened, provide an initial means of grasping the coexistence of perfect-yet-strange illusion with the invasion of utter barbarity. History aside, this coexistence returns us to the title of my article—the language of the Other—and points us towards the way in which language may emerge both as the source of an unsustainable illusion, and the violent force which invades it. By way of approaching the language of the Other I shall begin by exploring how *Between the Acts* achieves within its own devices the conveyance of a strangeness so absolute that only the collapse of the separation between reality and hallucination can explain it. To understand the text from this perspective, a comparison with certain key moments from an earlier work—*The Waves*—provides a helpful starting point.
- 3 Strangeness rents tears in the text of *The Waves* at the pivotal moment of Percival's death. Neville who introduces it expresses the moment that 'the world crashed' (Woolf 2008, 124), casting his prior experience of reality into an unreal dimension and leaving a new 'reality' in its place. But this new world, more real than the normality he inhabited before, is real in the sense Lacan has since given a term once evocative of the reassuring and reliable.<sup>2</sup> For Neville, 'Barns and summer days in the country, rooms where we sat—all now lie in the unreal world which is gone' (Woolf 2008, 124). The real which succeeds the barns and summer days is tinged with hallucinatory dread: 'Now I say there is a grinning, there is subterfuge. There is something sneering behind our backs' (Woolf 2008, 125). For Rhoda this new real has all the solidity of a mirage: 'The houses are lightly founded to be puffed over by a breath of air' (Woolf 2008, 131). Finally it is left to Bernard in his summing up to bring out all the complexities of this exchange between reality and real following his recollection of the shock of Percival's tragic death. 'I saw the first morning he would never see—the

sparrows were like toys dangled from a string by a child' (Woolf 2008, 220). At first glance Bernard seems to convey with poignancy the experience of reality as dislocated by loss, an unhinging in which elements of the visual world emerge as manipulated artefacts in a universal illusion. Yet Bernard resumes: 'To see things without attachment, from the outside, and to realize their beauty in itself—how strange! And then the sense that a burden has been removed: pretence and make-believe and unreality are gone, and lightness has come with a kind of transparency, making oneself invisible and things seen through as one walks—how strange' (Woolf 2008, 220). The strange illusion of the sparrows with strings attached does not produce a sense of universal deception and the anxiety associated with it. Bernard's sparrows are the first source of a feeling of rapture which is heightened by further discoveries as he goes to look at pictures. Gazing at the Madonnas, pillars, arches, orange trees in the paintings he passes in the gallery, Bernard feels an overwhelming sense of unity with his surroundings. "Here" I said, "we are together without interruption." This freedom, this immunity, seemed then a conquest, and stirred in me such exaltation that I go there, even now, to bring back exaltation and Percival' (Woolf 2008, 220).<sup>3</sup> With these words the purpose of Bernard's conquest of separation becomes clear. He has, in his immediate reception of the news of Percival's death, conjured away the recognition of his loss. This trick of denial is not sustainable. The exalted real of the sparrows and paintings gives way to the sordid realities of an imperfect world as he observes with 'disillusioned clarity the despicable non-entity of the street' (Woolf 2008, 222).

4 Yet this reality too has its own strangeness, even if it has no beauty. Its menacing contingency calls for paranoid hyper-vigilance, where men are 'fools and gulls' and 'any slate may fly from a roof, any car may swerve, for there is neither rhyme nor reason when a drunk man staggers about with a club in his hand' (Woolf 2008, 222). The text abolishes the border between reality and real in three intriguing stages. The normality which precedes Percival's loss becomes unreal, then a paranoid reality emerges in which images of sneering or drunken obscenity pull the strings of the deceiving universe. Beyond this unbearable real lies a realm of rapture which has the power to spirit away loss, but remains nonetheless imbued with images of the artificial—with toy sparrows attached to strings. This last stratum of experience demands the protagonist's total surrender for the control it exerts is absolute. It is a dimension which relies for its power of 'one-making' on the manipulation of everything within it as bulwarks against cries, cracks fissures and loss. Appearing in this isolated, localised form in *The Waves*, it marks only a temporary state: Bernard's initial repudiation of the death of his friend. When it returns in *Between the Acts*, it is the opposite of a circumscribed dimension.

5 Woolf's strategy for the creation of an illusion without borders is to solder the 'reality' of life at Pointz hall in the summer of 1939 to the performance of the village pageant. Described by Kermode in his introduction to the novel as a 'huge patch on the texture of the book, an alogical rhyme' (Kermode 1992, xxx), this magnificent piece of nonsense—for neither reader nor fictional spectator can work out its meaning—signifies illusion as such: theatrical illusion, and the illusion of meaning. On closer inspection, we are constantly invited to see the same structures at work in the narrative which surrounds it. The disjointed script of the actors, systematically interrupted by gestures, by bursts of music, above all by the wind which blows the words away, is echoed in the exchanges between The Olivers and their guests, which are pitted with interruptions, repetitions, ditties and rhymes as they mirror the language of the play. The 'hoity te doity te ray do' of the grand illusion enacted by the guests at Pointz Hall resides in this language as well as in the readily identifiable character types they perform: old Lucy, old Bart and their opposing world views, the squabbling couple, the ageing flirt, the ambiguous young man, the gentleman farmer, his wife, and the drama queen, La Trobe. More significantly still, our characters move in a world which is more carefully staged than the pageant itself. The cow coughs on cue to break the silence which falls between the guests on the first evening—and conversation resumes. The thrush which hops across the lawn the following morning does so to oblige. Cow and bird join in the pageant verse and the rain is staged: it will fall just once on the pageant in a shower, so that nothing shall be left out of this universal *mise-en-scène*. Above all there are the swallows. The swallows will dance in patterns, their performance among the rafters of

the noble barn is a spectacle laid on for the assembled company, and their staging is crucial.

6 Swallows in *Between the Acts* are the key to the seamless joining of illusion and reality. They are related to the moment of rapture in *The Waves*, which accompanies the successful manipulation of the sparrows, 'like toys dangled from a string by a child' (Woolf 2008, 220). There must be no mistake in the swallow-effect. When the swallows fly perfectly on cue, illusion and reality are finally, completely merged: 'They were rolling up the lake and uprooting the bulrushes. Real swallows were skimming over real grass' (Woolf 1992, 155). As the theatrical props are uplifted the swallows arrive on cue, taking the place of the artificial scenery. The narrator emphasizes their status as real and we might understand by this that the real world of nature now prevails over the fake nature which imitated it and has been rolled away. But this real quality of birds and grass has another, more compelling meaning: actual birds and grass have now been made to take on the role of the illusion—making illusion real. Thus at the end of the pageant the play continues; and at the end of the novel there is no return to reality but the start of another *mise-en-scène*. 'Then the curtain rose. They spoke' (Woolf 1992, 197). When man and woman fight as Giles and Isa must do, 'as the dog fox fights with the vixen in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night' (Woolf 1992, 197), their violence is an attempt to overcome and abolish difference—a difference on which, for Freud, all recognition of difference is based—sexual difference and its unique role in the construction of reality. In the raising of the curtain at the end, the return at the end to the beginning, Woolf indicates to us that the abolition of difference is, from the beginning, always already achieved: the images and figures that emerge from the pages of *Between the Acts* assume from the start, the status of a perfectly managed replication of reality which, as such, can more accurately be qualified as a hallucination.

7 Hallucination has but one purpose from the perspective of the subject it inhabits: to deceive. Implied in this purpose is the presence of an agent who is not deceived—a subject who pulls the strings and controls the huge deception at work. Woolf's stake in *Between the Acts* concerns the rigour of the staged illusion. If the deception is perfect, the undeceived agent who manipulates will not appear in its persecutory form. The perfect illusion is momentarily created in *The Waves*, in Bernard's initial denial of loss, when the sparrows appear as toys on strings. Here we glimpse the controlling agent, but its form—the playing children—is unambiguously benign. When 'reality' returns - but this reality is equally hallucinatory—the illusion is flawed, hence the persecutor appears in the guise of the grinning sneer for Neville, and, for Bernard, the drunken aggressor with the club. Fear and anxiety immediately come into play. In *Between the Acts*, the perfection is flawlessly maintained throughout; the manipulator does not appear but its place is marked by the stain in the grass, the olive green ring of the snake. 'Dead? No, choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die [...] birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion' (Woolf 1992, 89). The tell-tale sign of the monstrous inversion of illusion and reality is quickly dispatched by Giles with a stamp of his foot, and the game of deception goes unchallenged until the text has been written.

8 The novel as perfect illusion which offers no crack or fissure through which anxiety and dread may enter, might furnish some explanation for the comparative pleasure and excitement which carried Woolf so happily through the writing of it. Yet at the completion of the work, as the perfect illusion comes to an end, Woolf pays the highest price for the rapturous indulgence which *Between the Acts* afforded. Quentin Bell records that as she steps back from the work she sees that something is dreadfully wrong, and he sums up the impact of this realization in the strongest possible terms. 'Such a revelation, so horrible and so violent a peripeteia, might well have set her upon the path to suicide' (Bell 1974, 8). What does Woolf ultimately see in the pages of *Between the Acts* that causes such a tragic outcome?

9 Let us return to this dismantling of difference implied in the looming battle between Isa and Giles. Difference established at the core of Oedipus relies upon the recognition of a separation between masculine and feminine which instigates simultaneously a separation between mother and child. The differentiating operations of language maintain these crucial boundaries, structuring the framework of reality, upholding the

laws of culture, the permissible, the forbidden, the making of meaning. The dimension they uphold, founded in language and termed by Lacan, symbolic, has to hold. It is grounded in a primordial loss of the first object of desire and the establishment of a law primordially associated with the figure of the father. Maud Mannoni, in her critical work, *Elles ne savent pas ce qu'elles disent*, interprets *Between the Acts* as the moment in her writing career in which the author turns from her previous focus on the maternal figure to examine the locus of the father. It is a valuable insight. Mannoni interprets Pointz Hall as a prototypical seat of patriarchy, 'une atmosphère dominée par le poids de la lignée paternelle et le système d'éducation victorien' (Mannoni 1998, 104), and further notes that the house, passed down from father to son, 'se situe en un lieu où la sécheresse s'oppose à l'eau' (Mannoni 1998, 104). Mannoni suggests that in turning towards the father, Woolf, in her novel, discovers a desert. Associated with this idea is the status of the masculine figures she depicts in *Between the Acts*, who carry no weight: Giles, 'silly little boy with blood on his boots' (Woolf 1992, 100), Dodge, accessory to Mrs Manresa, Bart, the doddering buffoon who frightens children, all lack agency. Woman still predominates in Isa who carries the narrative, La Trobe who toils over the pageant, Mrs Manresa who works at seduction, Mrs Haines, who will destroy the attraction between Isa and her husband 'as a thrush pecks the wings off a butterfly' (Woolf 1992, 5). Beside these active creatures, the masculine figures are, like Candish, not real but stuffed men, shadows, hollowed out by the symbolic catastrophe that crashes like a tidal wave through the narrative. This flawed symbolic dimension, whose failure is evoked in the lack of substance which characterises the paternal figures in the text, cannot be viewed as a failure or flaw in the personality or mentality of the author who creates it. Rather it emphasises that the creator of the text must use words and significations which work with and around a central structural defect—the failure of the paternal metaphor—which is a key to understanding their properties.<sup>4</sup> We must look to the words of the play, which spread into the surrounding text (the phrase 'Dispersed are we' is an example of words which start in the context of the play and are echoed beyond it) to pinpoint the properties that define this symbolic catastrophe and corroborate the view that *Between the Acts* constitutes Woolf's writing at its strangest.

- 10 This strangeness starts in the gaps and pauses that systematically puncture the text of the play, supported by the twists and turns in subject matter:

Palaces tumble down (they resumed), Babylon, Nineveh, Troy... And Caesar's great house...all fallen they lie...Where the plover nests was the arch...through which the Romans trod...Digging and delving we break with the share of the plough the clod...Where Clytemnestra watched for her Lord... saw the beacons blaze on the hills... we see only the clod... Digging and delving we pass... and the Queen and watch tower fall... for Agamemnon has ridden away... Clytemnestra is nothing but... (Woolf 1992, 125)

- 11 The effect of the script is to accentuate the precedence of the signifiers as they anticipate the closure of the sentence. The interruption of phrases defers the expected signification which oppressively looms, suspended over the words which fail to produce it. In the words of Lacan, 'le mot fait poids en lui-même' (Lacan 1981, 43). Behind Lacan's image of the word which carries weight within itself is the common dynamic of language in which a signifier has only the status of referral: it is merely, one might say, a subject for another signifier. Its function of *renvoiement* allows it to produce meanings, which in their turn refer to other meanings. In Woolf's text something entirely different is happening at the level of links between signifiers, and the relation of signifier to signification. The impact of repeated interruption is to break the chain which allows signifiers to interlink, to relate among themselves in the creation of meaning. The impact of this isolation of signifiers is focused continually by references at the fringes of the script of the play: 'The wind blew the words away' (Woolf 1992, 112); 'the breeze blew gaps between their words' (Woolf 1992, 125); 'The words died away' (Woolf 1992, 125). In Lacan's terms, the meaning arising from the weighted word apparent in the script of play could be defined in the following way: 'Avant d'être réductible à une autre signification, il signifie en lui-même quelque chose d'ineffable, c'est une signification qui renvoie avant tout à la signification en tant que telle' (Lacan



1981, 43). In other words the great, resonant names (Babylon, Nineveh, Troy; and elsewhere, England, the Queen, Mary in heaven, the valiant Rhoderick—to name but a sample) or the animal references (rhinoceros, reindeer, robin, wren, moth), or the heavy allusion (Sir Spaniel's 'I smell a rat!' (Woolf 1992, 117) gives, for instance more than a passing nod to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), elements such as these and many others thrown into the script, are not some arcane code to be deciphered. They are significations which refer to signification as such.

12 The weighted word is not the only enigmatic feature of the text which does not refer. Lacan notes a second. 'À l'opposé, il y a la forme que prend la signification quand elle ne renvoie plus à rien. C'est la formule qui se répète, qui se réitère, qui se serine avec une insistance stéréotypée. C'est ce que nous pourrions appeler, à l'opposé du mot, la ritournelle' (Lacan 1981, 43–44). The feature of the refrain, frequent repetition through which phrases gradually divest themselves of meaning, plays a prominent part in the script of the play. The much reiterated 'digging and delving' is one such example, whilst contingent bursts of nursery rhyme, proverb, pun, and common saying, chime into the script like jingles—unannounced, redundant, nonsensical. 'The king is in his counting house' (Woolf 1992, 103), 'Where's there's a will there's a way' (Woolf 1992, 117), 'a pig in a poke' (Woolf 1992, 114). Lacan summarizes this co-existence of weighted and empty words in discourse in the following way: 'Ces deux formes, la plus pleine et la plus vide arrêtent la signification, c'est une sorte de plomb dans le filet, dans le réseau du discours du sujet' (Lacan 1981, 44). Within the framework of the Lacanian structure, the breakdown of signification implies the collapse of the symbolic order: the discourse of the Other returns in the dimension of the real.

13 The recognition of a symbolic collapse, in the Lacanian sense, at the core of *Between the Acts* allows us to draw together salient features of the work. The portrayal of the impotent patriarch corroborates such a collapse, as does the erosion of the distinction between reality and illusion—or as Lacan would describe it, between imaginary and real—as the force of this last dimension comes into play. The order of the real, impossible to represent through images and words, unbearable both to language and the body, bends and skews the narrative of Woolf's last work like an invisible and deadly forcefield. As the author emerges from the rapture of a perfectly wrought illusion, the price of its creation becomes apparent. Woolf has simultaneously borne witness to the return of the signifier in the register of the Real—the language of the Other in its most brutally invasive form. It is the accomplishment of what she ironically called, through the character of Bernard, a 'little language' (Woolf 2008, 246): a language of howls and cries, which breaks into articulated speech with seemingly benign, childlike, amorous nonsense, but whose empty, inarticulate, primal form has the effects of a barbarous invasion. The result of her achievement is, as we know, not little, but massive—and its impact is fatal.

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## Notes

1 See for example Sophie MARRET (2002); Anne-Marie SMITH-DI BIASIO (2010).

2 Lacan structures his work around three dimensions: an imaginary register where the visual images which constitute perceived reality are projected; a symbolic order grounded in language, and a further dimension defined by its expulsion from the realm of the symbolico-imaginary, being ineffable, unrepresentable, and unbearable for the human psyche and body. For Lacan, what cannot come into the light of the symbolic, may return in the real with hallucinatory or delusional force.

3 In her article 'Divagations' in *Virginia Woolf. Le pur et l'impur*, Sophie Marret, gives a persuasive Lacanian reading of *The Waves* in which the encounter with the real is likewise summarised as conveying 'un sentiment d'étrangeté à soi-même mais aussi de complétude' (BERNARD AND REYNIER 2002). Marret widens her argument to highlight Woolf's writing more generally as the deployment of a language termed transparent, as protection against a traumatic encounter with the real: the signifier is used to positivise a loss which combats the invasion of the dimension of the real. My account of *Between the Acts* is a complementary study which has a different emphasis focused on the manner in which the effort of Woolfian language to abolish loss is the operation which opens the gates to the invasion of the real.

4 My point here is that Mannoni's insights could be associated with a remark of Kristeva's which links Woolf's illness and death with what Kristeva presents as a failure 'to identify with the symbolic paternal order' (KRISTEVA 1986, 39). My analysis seeks to focus less on the idea of the failure of the individual to succeed in an identification, and more on the structural impossibilities which confront a subject for whom the symbolic order cannot hold.

## Pour citer cet article

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## Auteur

### Katharine Swarbrick

Katharine Swarbrick is lecturer in French at Edinburgh University and specialises in Lacanian theory. She has worked on a range of French authors of the 18th and 20th-centuries, recent articles including 'Truismes and Truths', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* Vol. 46, 2009; 'Lacanian Orlando' *Contradictory Woolf. Selected papers from the Twenty-first Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf*, Clemson University Digital Press, 2012; 'Orlanda et la problématique de la jouissance', *Jacqueline Harpman. L'Aventure Littéraire*, Peter Lang, 2013.

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